

Influencing Businesses Re: Drug-Free Policies

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When talking about the problems that he has with employers, Tom Pool sometimes uses the expression, "It's like trying to herd cats." Well, I also have a bunch of cats that I try to herd - the Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). I want to talk about some of the findings and some of the problems that we run into with EAPs in our drug-free workplace program.

We tried very hard, in setting up the regulations for this program, to require a lot of involvement from the Employee Assistance Program. As Tom said, they must be approved by our agency. We also require that they subscribe to the professional program standards of either of the two professional EAP organizations.

Because the legislation says that the primary focus of the EAP shall be the rehabilitation of employees suffering from alcoholism or other forms of chemical dependency, we added two requirements for EAP operations. One is that all EAP staff who perform assessment, referral, and monitoring duties must be certified alcohol/drug specialists. Certification must be obtained by either a national or international certification programs, or by one of the State of Washington's two certification programs. Second, we require work to be done face-to-face, in person, and not by phone. There is a phrase you hear around the state of Washington is "1-800-I don't give a damn EAP." We wanted to avoid that as much as possible. Not that out-of-state providers can't be on our approved list; but they must have staff who were certified in the state to do that kind of work with the employee.

Tom and I often say to employers, "Look, the real savings from this program is not in the initial five percent; that's just a tease. Take a look at this, see if it's worth your while to give it a try." And we often hear the Jerry Maguire phrase in response: "Show me the money." "Show me the money and I'll do it."

In fact, I got a call last week from an EAP provider who said to me, "I've got a client company who is disappointed because they haven't gotten their check yet."

I said, "What check?"

He said, "The five percent check."

I said, "It's a discount. You don't get a check. That's a rebate." So employers are not understanding this, and EAPs are not always understanding it, either.

Not only do we require that EAPs have certified staff, we also require that they have the ability to offer the entire set of core services. (If you're not familiar with that kind of terminology, ask Paul Roman sometime; he wrote a book called Core Technology that defines what has come to be known as core services).

We also require that the EAP offer the employer a system for handling employees whose job performances are declining because of personal problems. Some EAPs offer a system that is nothing more than "Here's my number. Call me when you need some help." We don't consider that a system, but at the same time, we really don't have the authority to do more. This is one of the problems that we've had.

So what is an EAP that does primary prevention? It's whatever the company says it is, or could be. I was pleased to hear Dr. Hullett say that it refers to two elements, both of which are germane to our discount program: number one, providing education to all employees. And second, really working with management and supervisory staff to help them in dealing with those employees. As one pioneer in the EAP field has said, and I think very sagely, "For every troubled employee, there is a troubled supervisor."

That's where we like to see the EAP focusing. Yet, here are some of the problems EAPs identify with employers: "Companies fail to inform employees regarding their policy; do not

follow through on providing the training.” “Primary resistance is seen against training supervisors.” “Staffing and scheduling issues have precluded training from taking place on a consistent basis.” There are other practical problems with employees being out in the field, on shift work or on 24-hour-a-day shifts, 7-days-a-week, and so forth. Those are practical problems that we have to look at, too. So that has been one source of problems, or tensions, between employers and EAPs.

On the other hand, the major finding of this year – and it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone in the EAP field – is that the amount of employee rehabilitation that occurs in the workplace is directly related to the extent to which the EAP is providing those services. The more education, the more training, the more supervisory contact the EAP has, the higher the percentage of employees who are directed into rehabilitation.

To show this even more vividly, we took one EAP that had served 36 employers. In 17 of them, all small (26 employees on average), not a single referral was made for rehabilitation for an alcoholic or addicted employee, and there was no involvement in training or education.

On the other hand, among the other 19 employers they served, again, not large (36 average employees), 6.5 percent of employees had been identified and referred for help with a substance abuse problem. And in those 19 companies, the EAP had made an average of five contacts with supervisors for each one of those cases. That's just part of what it means to be a good EAP, in my opinion.